

# Increasing access to healthy, affordable foods through health centers in Boston

by: Aileen Shen

## SUMMARY

Poverty, food security, and obesity are interconnected in Boston, as in the rest of the U.S., particularly for public housing/Section 8 housing (PH/S8H) residents. From 1/1/16 - 9/29/16, Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing (PHH) supported Boston community health centers in their partnerships with local non-profit food vendors to increase access to healthy, affordable foods for PH/S8H residents in community settings and improve their overall health, including obesity prevention. These efforts increased healthy food purchases by 491%.



## CHALLENGE

Poverty, food security, and obesity are interconnected in Boston, as in the rest of the U.S., with public housing/Section 8 housing (PH/S8H) residents reporting poorer health and higher risk factors for chronic disease and other health issues, compared to other residents. In 2013, 67% of PH/S8H in Boston were obese/overweight compared to 54% of other residents. Additionally, public (29.2%) and Section 8 (30.7%) housing residents were nearly 4 times more likely to

report that they were hungry, but did not eat because they could not afford enough food compared to other Boston residents (7.8%). PH/S8H residents were also less likely to consume fruits and vegetables, which is a risk factor for obesity and poor overall health. Adding to the poverty-food security-obesity triad, is the cost of, and a lack of access to, transportation, which affects the ability to obtain food from other areas.

## YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

Supporting healthy food environments in community settings, including local health centers, benefits from broad support and partnerships, including those between food non-profit organizations, community-based organizations (such as health centers), public housing developments, local government, and community members in general. From volunteers that staff food access partnerships to supportive neighboring businesses and local government, anyone can play a role in improving food security!

*"It's very important for us to work with our patients to not only address medical issues, but also social determinants of health. The Fresh Truck is a key component to help our patients access healthy eating and healthy foods."*

- Karen van Unen

## Contact

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## SOLUTION

From 1/1/16 - 9/29/16, Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing (PHH), with CDC funding, supported 4 Boston community health centers in their partnerships with local non-profit food vendors, to increase access to healthy, affordable foods for PH/S8H residents. Scaling up food access programs at health centers near public housing developments and targeting outreach to PH/S8H residents helps bridge the food gap for some of the most vulnerable Boston residents by addressing their need for food that is healthy, affordable, and accessible and raising awareness of these resources. Improving access is also an important tool for obesity prevention and improving the overall health of communities.

## RESULTS

As of September 2016, one of the health centers, the South End Community Health Center (SECHC), has increased access to affordable, healthy foods in neighborhoods housing close to 2,500 PH/SH residents. With the receipt of a parking waiver from the Boston Transportation Department, SECHC was able to increase Fresh Truck visits from once a month to once a week and expand its hours from 2 hours per visit to 3. This increased the number of visits from 12 per year to 52 and the number of hours of access from 24 per year to 156 - a 650% increase. With the increased access, sales have also increased from an average of 66 per month to 390 per month - a 491% increase. Due to the success of partnership, the SECHC site has quickly become the #1 Fresh Truck site in all of Boston.

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS

In the coming year, 9/30/16-9/29/17, PHH will scale up its model for healthy, affordable food access at health centers to 3 additional health centers in Boston. All 4 health centers will also pilot food insecurity screenings and referrals in clinical settings. By identifying food insecure patients and connecting them to healthy, affordable food resources, including those at health centers, we seek to close the food insecurity gap in these neighborhoods. Additionally, the initiative will continue to target outreach to BHA developments neighboring the health centers in order to reach some of the most vulnerable Boston residents. Finally, we hope to share the outcomes of the initiative to sustain it and scale it up to even more health centers.